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Cultural Exchange: The Intangible Benefits

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Each year, approximately 300,000 foreign nationals from more than 200 countries and territories are sponsored by organizations designated by the U.S. Department of State to study, teach, conduct research or take part in internships and on-the-job training programs here in the United States. Not to be confused with the H-1B Visa, the J-1 is a temporary, non-immigrant visa.

The J-1 Visa is an outcome of the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 to “strengthen relations between the U.S. and other countries.” As a visitor under J-1 Visa regulations, international students, researchers, teachers, doctors and trainees come to the U.S. to acquire meaningful professional experience alongside their American counterparts in schools, corporations, think tanks, government organizations and NGOs.

After their time in the U.S. has ended, participants return to their home country and share their knowledge and cultural experiences, helping to dispel some unfair anti-American stereotypes.

I challenge you to engage with our international visitors and see what you learn.

Exchanges are means to grow strong, mutually-beneficial relationships between people in different regions. Each region has expertise, passion, innovation, insight, and hospitality to share with others.

So what can we learn from these temporary guests that will impact us and lead to better cross-cultural relationships? Snippets of language? The strange foods they eat? Superficial knowledge of a faraway land?

Instead, consider in-depth conversations about their educational systems. How does the virtually *free* system of German schools—where it is almost unheard of to graduate with student debt—compare to ours? Or the Korean method of schooling: extremely rigid and hierarchical, producing one of the most highly educated workforces in the world. Is one better, or are they just different? Are they worth emulating in the U.S.?

Or the Venezuelan economy: how did it decline so rapidly to its current state? Was it solely because of the falling price of oil, or were there other factors? Could the government have avoided this? Did the people have a say? Could that kind of drastic economic failure and collapse of socioeconomic systems ever happen here?

I challenge you to engage with our international visitors and see what you learn. I've had five-minute conversations with young professionals from the tiniest, most remote villages in Africa; lengthy (but friendly) debates with visitors from Kazakhstan; and pleasant exchanges with co-workers from Honduras and Lebanon. I can tell you without a doubt, those conversations alone taught me more than most college courses could, and I wasn't left with a pile of debt to show for my time.

More importantly, if you have the chance or desire to host an international intern or trainee, *act* on it. Of course there are fees and paperwork involved, but if given the right opportunity and treated well, these interns and trainees will be our best worldwide ambassadors. And if you have personally experienced the benefits that J-1 exchange programs bring to U.S. communities, then your support is needed to ensure these programs continue to showcase the best of American values to the entire world.

And in times like these, we should all find a way to share the love.
